



10-15-1985

Being A Writer

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Recommended Citation

Turpin, Bob (1985) "Being A Writer," *Westview*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol5/iss1/3>

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BEING A WRITER



Want to be a writer, sell a million copies of your book, receive bunches of money? Sure, no problem. Take it from me; I wouldn't lie to you.

Get a wonderful idea for a book that can't miss the best-seller list. Everyone will rave about it, especially the editor, whoever he might be. You can count on at least \$25,000 in advance money. You can trade the old wreck off for a new wreck — get the wife, kiddies, and doggy nice gifts and still have money left.

Arm yourself with a box of freshly sharpened pencils, at least ten thousand research cards, a dozen notebooks, a tape recorder, camera, chewing gum, and a good stock of analgesic. Don't forget the headache pills before you leave for the nearest historical society and library.

You're met with a big smile and a "May I help you, please?" By the time you finish telling about your best-selling book you're there to research, the smile is gone. The comment is either a snarl with burning, hate-filled eyes or a disgusted, tired, ho-hum grunt. Right away, you know the thrill is gone, for you have said something wrong. It will be very hard to find someone when you need the help so freely offered a few minutes before.

Two weeks later when you arrive, you're met with an "Oh, it's you again." You're told how busy they are and that they can help you very little today. You nod your understanding, feeling a bit sick to your stomach. Later you saunter by the desk as lost as you can be and find the clerk quietly nibbling on a candy bar and reading yesterday's newspaper. You decide that it's going to take longer than you had expected to do your research.

After a hard day's work, you drive ten miles home at twenty miles an hour because your carburetor has a problem that you haven't taken the time to repair. Besides, you're a writer — not a mechanic. You growl at the dog, yell at your wife, and gripe about the kids. As you look over your day's work, you find half a dozen cards, two of which you throw away because they are repeats of others

you have done.

The next day is the same, followed by several more just like it. You're beginning to feel that your idea wasn't very good after all. You can't find half of what you need; and suddenly you realize that the names, places, dates, and everything else are changing. Maybe it never even took place — it's a work of fiction, not fact.

Finally, after forever, the research is done — all you're going to do anyway. After all, you have half a dozen versions; surely you can come up with one that makes sense. A few days later, it's panic time again: you need sixty thousand words; but you may come out with forty thousand if you're lucky. Instead of the thirty-five pictures available, you have six good ones.

With everything together, you're ready to do your first draft. It looks better than you thought it would. You probably won't need anymore than one draft; it looks so good.

After three weeks of sweating over the typewriter, you're thumb sore and eyesore; but you're ready to mail the manuscript. You reason that there's no sense to insure it; after all, the first editor who reads it will be overjoyed. You decide even to send it first class — go all out.

For the next week and a half, you dream about what you will do with the money. Of course there will be parties, promotion trips, a paid vacation of sorts — business and pleasure.

One morning, you're having your third cup of breakfast coffee when you see the postman coming up the walk. It's too soon to be hearing from the editor, so you relax and eat another breakfast roll with coconut and raspberry coating. The doorbell rings; you open the door to face the mailman, who has a broad smile on his face. The brown package he's holding appears to have come straight from the trash basket. It even has tire marks across one corner. You stare in

disbelief at your manuscript, while you fumble in your pockets for \$2.82 additional postage due. You don't even receive overdue bills so quickly.

Back at the table, you open the package with shaky fingers. You find a printed slip inside that tells you in effect thanks but no thanks. You feel numb. You have been out three months of research, nineteen dollars of postage, three weeks of typing; and now you find that they didn't even sign the rejection slip. Even the signature was printed.

After two weeks of brooding and feeling sorry for yourself, you decide to try it again. Probably a woman editor — what does she know about Western history, you rationalize. You say that you bet she has never even seen a horse and probably doesn't even know the difference between a cow and a bull.

This time, you make sure it's a male editor and that he publishes Western history. You're smarter this time as well and send the manuscript book rate and insure it. Typing is expensive.

Three weeks pass — then a month. Things are looking good. You're thinking about starting research on your second idea. Two months go by; the last one seems like a year. The market guide says the longer it's gone, the better chance it has. Eight weeks have passed, and you know the book's as good as in print. You're considering a call to the editor to ask him how things are going and when you can expect to receive the contract.

Again you see the postman coming; only this time, there's a feeling of dread. You meet him at the door. There it is — a letter from the editor right on top of the bills. You can't wait to close the door and open the envelope. You turn pale at the first few words: "Sorry; unsuited for our needs at the present time; better luck elsewhere." This time, the rejection is signed personally — not printed. You'll be receiving your manuscript

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under separate cover.

Sick at heart, your mind a blank, you stagger into the den and slump into your chair; the ragged envelope seems to mock and laugh at you.

With an explosive curse, you grab the envelope and fling it across the room where it bursts open spilling out a shower of white pages which float down around you like snow. Your wife rushes in to see if you have hurt yourself. But the only thing that's hurt is your pride.

With a knowing nod, she retreats and quietly closes the door behind her. After a few tears of disgust and two full glasses of a cold drink, you feel somewhat better.

The time has come to get an agent. Why go through all the torture of rejection? After all, let him do the worrying; he gets ten percent. You pick a good-sounding name from a list of over two hundred and off your query goes.

It comes back to you six times in a

row with one of two excuses. It sounds too much like something else that has been done, or they don't accept new clients unless they have sold ten thousand dollars worth of work. You're furious again. If you already had ten thousand dollars from sales, why would you need an agent?

Finally, one agent agrees to have a look. Your hopes soar to the heavens; this is your big chance. He'll have connections and make a sale right away. You pop a fresh copy in the mail and dive into your work with better feelings.

Almost before it has had time to reach the agent, it's back. He's got to be the quickest reader you've ever seen, and he did it without denting a sheet. The note enclosed tells you it's pretty good but nothing he'd care to handle — maybe one of the small publishing houses would be interested. By now, you're a nervous wreck of a person; you're worrying too much; your ulcer is threatening to

burst, and your wife's considering an extended vacation with her mother.

You calmly pick up the wrinkled package and drop it into the waste basket along with the notes on your latest idea. You wash your hands of the whole idea of becoming a writer. It's a quick way to starvation and to getting rid of your entire family.

The only job available is frying hamburgers at the local diner. You grit your teeth and tackle it. You feel that you'll never be able to wash the smell of fried onions out of your skin, and you never did like hamburgers anyway.

A few weeks later, you happen by the typewriter. The manuscript still lies in the waste basket. Maybe the small houses would be interested; just to get the book published would be a start — you have to crawl before you can run.

What do you do now? Will you try that small house or simply give up in despair? ❧

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HOMA: FOOT-LOOSE AND FANCY-FREE; THE COWMAN'S SOUTH-WEST: BEING THE REMINISCENCES OF OLIVER NELSON; THE FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES OF OKLAHOMA: A REPORT ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS; HISTORY OF THE CHOCTAW, CHICKASAW, AND NATCHEZ INDIANS; A HISTORY OF THE INDIANS OF THE UNITED STATES; and GERONIMO: THE MAN, HIS TIME, HIS PLACE.

Dr. Debo was a contributor to *ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA*, wrote a column, "This Week in Oklahoma History," for the *OKLAHOMA CITY TIMES*, 1952-1954, and published a great many articles and reviews in magazines and newspapers. Debo's historical works are so numerous, in fact, that five years ago Oklahoma State University produced a complete bibliography of her published books and articles. She continues in an advisory capacity for the Nebraska Educational

Television Network on Indian-white relations in the settlement of the Northern Great Plains, as told by Indian participants.

One might assume that the Debo style is altogether too stiff and scholarly for the average reader. Not so. She is a masterful storyteller whose writings entertain with warmth and homespun philosophy while incorporating results of her exacting research. She says she did research in Washington before the National Archives were established. When researching, she does nothing else. She stays at it eight hours a day, six days a week, writing in longhand on half sheets of paper. The result is such meticulous organization that she can use whole blocks of these half pages as chapters in her books. She used original notes from interviews with the Apaches made many years earlier when writing the Geronimo biography, adding later research as needed. This is her most recent, and possibly last, book, an award winner

published in 1976 when "Indianism was a popular social issue and turquoise jewelry one of the best selling items in America."

Angie Debo has a special feeling about her *OKLAHOMA: FOOT-LOOSE AND FANCY-FREE*. When Greenwood Press reissued it from the 1949 release in time for Oklahoma's Diamond Jubilee, she said, "I have a special affection for this evaluation of the Sooner spirit, but it marks the golden anniversary of the day I became an Oklahoman. It never occurred to me that one day I should be asked to write an interpretation of the society I entered. . . Many outward changes have come. . . but here are the roots of the past, present, and future. The Oklahoma spirit is ever the same. This work is not a history nor a description of the physical background of the state but my definition of the special quality of its people."

A quality exemplified by Angie Debo, First Lady of Oklahoma history. ❧